The activists of Social Centres in the ‘Locally Unwanted Land Use’ movements in Italy: from the No Tav to the No Muos
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ABSTRACT
Previous research on LULU-Locally Unwanted Land Use movements in Italy (like against large infrastructures) have highlighted as the Social Centres activists are central actors, bringing generational resources, political-organizational experiences and repertoires of action (countercultural activities, creative demonstrations, direct actions). While often labeled as violent by the media and the authorities, they are integrated in protest networks through their participation in mobilization and a growth in bonds of mutual trust, contributing to turn the struggle from Nimby (Not In My Back Yard) to Nope (Not On the Planet Earth); they nevertheless can bring elements of internal tensions to the movement with respect to more moderate and institutional actors involved. In this paper, based on current field research, we focus on the role played by Social Centres activists within two of the most important LULU movements in Italy: those against the building of the high-speed railway in Val di Susa (No TAV) and the construction of a US Navy ground station of satellite communications in Sicily (No Muos). Adopting a strategic perspective in analyzing the interactions with other movement groups and activists, we argue that the Social Centres militants are able to propose and apply political strategies more or less accepted by the other movement players. Therefore, besides than giving, the Social Centres also receive back outcomes that can be evaluated positively and/or negatively, that means the relations with Lulu movements are not one-way but two-way.

Introduction: Social Centres and LULU Mobilizations

The activists of the squatted Social Centres have been and still are very often engaged in the territorial or LULU (Locally Unwanted Land Use) movements in Italy, as those against large infrastructures (the No Tav is the most well-known). Because this paper focuses on the role played by the former within the latter, we prefer to briefly present before the main characteristics and peculiarities of the two collective actors in order to better understand why they are so often intertwined and linked among them.

The squatting of Social Centres is a long-lasting phenomenon all over Europe: from the 1970s to now, several hundred occupations have taken place, above all in southern European countries like Italy (Mudu 2004; 2012), Spain (Martinez 2013) and Greece, but also in Germany, Holland, Great Britain (more recently) and Denmark (Piazza 2012; SQEK 2013; SQEK, Cattaneo & Martinez 2014; Piazza & Genovese 2016). The Social Centres can be considered at the same time “liberated spaces” and urban protest actors whose reach of action often goes beyond the local dimension (Andretta et al. 2015). They are usually empty and abandoned large buildings, previously not used for housing (former factories, cinemas, theatres, schools, etc.), which are occupied by left-wing radical and antagonist activists in order to self-organize and self-manage mainly political, social, countercultural activities, and practicing participatory and non-hierarchical modes of political and social relationships (Piazza 2012: 9). Living in these squatted places is optional, because it is not the primary goal of the occupants, although it happens; more recently there are some squats in which the “housing occupations are beginning to turn into social centres too” (Martinez & Cattaneo 2014: 246), like Metropoliz in Rome (Mudu 2014: 148-149), or vice versa. Social Centres are “liberated spaces”,

1 First draft. Do not quote without authors’ permission.
because they are squatted with the intention to be freed by mainstream cultural, social and political relationships, values, norms, authorities’ control; the squatters and the people attending them can self-manage public activities, mainly countercultural, seeking to establish alternative relationships and values opposed to the logic of market, of capitalism and to public authorities (state and local subunits). However, Social Centres are also “political contentious places”: sites or locations where the occupants and the activists organize radical and antagonist political and social protest campaigns, addressed outside the squatted spaces, in the city, in the urban fabric and in the society at large (Andretta et al. 2015: 209). Therefore, Social Centres cannot be considered only physical spaces, but also heterogeneous groups of squatters and activists that represent collective actors belonging to the radical left, that in Italy is dubbed ’antagonistic‘ left² (Piazza 2012: 14; see also della Porta & Piazza 2008: 43). They are indeed urban but not only local protest actors, who denounce the scarcity of space for sociability outside of commercial circuits, campaigning against market-oriented renewal and property urban speculation. They are urban actors because spatially localized in the city centres or in the peripheral and working class districts (they are not local chapters of national organizations), however their reach of action is often not only local, but also regional, national and global; the issues faced are both local (social spaces and services, housing, urban renewal, etc.) although always set in general framework, and extra-local (Andretta et al. 2015: 209). In fact, claiming their political dimension, “social center activists and squatters are thus often engaged in broader protest campaigns and social movements, fighting against precariousness, urban speculation, racism, neo-fascism, state repression, militarization, war, locally unwanted land use, private-oriented education/university reforms” (SQEK 2013: 12). Moreover, when the squatted social centres develop cooperative relations with other squatting and social movement organizations, they play a key political role inside the wider squatters’ movement: they serve as an essential socio-spatial infrastructure for the coordination and public expression of the squatting as an autonomous urban movement (Martínez 2013: 882). Lastly, due to the radicalism of their claims (often not compatible with the logic of market and the institutional political system) and forms of action (often illegal and sometimes - but not always - confrontational with the police), the Social Centres are often labeled as violent by the mass media and the politicians, are subjected to forced evictions and their activists can suffer the repression by the authorities (with complaints, arrests and convictions).

As we have previously said, the Social Centers activists are involved also in the territorial mobilizations which are indeed emerged not only in Italy, but also in other countries, in the last decades. Usually, they are promoted at the beginning by local communities and citizens’ committees (della Porta 2004) that – from their territories of residence – are giving voice to their claims through protest, opposing to unwanted urban and territorial transformations. In fact, what is at the stake is the use of the land, the territory as expression of a social conflict on the relative ‘use value’, or ‘exchange value’: on the one side, the local political and economic elites that consider the territory and the city as a mean to make profit or get consensus (exchange value); on the other side, groups of citizens and associations that deem the territory a use value for social and environmental purposes (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 6).

These types of mobilizations are usually labeled by the media, politicians and part of scientific literature as affected by “Nimby syndrome” (Not In My Back Yard), that is associated with a conservative behavior and egotistical resistance to social change. They are interpreted as the refusal

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² In Italy, the ‘antagonistic left’ is distinguished from the ‘radical left’. On the one side, the ‘antagonists’ are those groups and activists belonging to these different political-ideological networks: autonomists, post-autonomists (ex White Overalls-Disobedients), Marxist-Leninists, anarchists, etc., in which the Social Centres are divided, making the movement heterogeneous and often split (Mudu 2012; Piazza 2013). On the other side, the ‘radical left’ is composed by the political parties placed on the extreme left of the political-institutional spectrum, such as SeL- Sinistra Italiana (Sinistra e Libertà - Left and Freedom - Italian Left), and those currently without representation in Parliament: PRC (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista - Refoundation Communist Party), PdCI (Partito dei Comunisti Italiani - Party of Italian Communists), and Greens (Piazza 2011: 330).
to pay the necessary costs (in terms of pollution, security, etc.) to attain public goods (Bobbio 1999), by few inhabitants who do not want public works, incinerators, military bases, etc., in their territory, but would be indifferent if these infrastructures were made somewhere else: in short, they would say: 'let them wherever you want, but not in my house'. Other scholars prefer to define these phenomena in neutral terms, using the acronym LULU to indicate conflicts related to Locally Unwanted Land Use (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 2; Andretta et al. 2015: 205); this category only registers the opposition to a certain use of territory not accepted by local population, without assessing a priori motivations and interpretative schemas. Still others scholars point out how residents accused of "nymbism", respond by building a NOPE (Not On the Planet Earth) discourse, that is affirming not to want disputed works “either in their own, nor in any other backyard” of the Earth, because they are considered damaging for common good (Trom 1999). In fact, many of these conflicts are only seemingly parochial/localistic and/or environmentalist: large infrastructures, polluting plants, bases and military installations are considered by the protesting local population, not only harmful to the environment and the public health, but also politically, socially and economically. Moreover, many Lulu conflicts become ‘trans-territorial’ movements: the protest actors are not only the local inhabitants and they intertwine themselves with other extra-local players, building networks that go beyond territorial dimension, and showing propositional capacity, and not just reactive; also their political dimension “goes beyond local boundaries because they involve institutional, political and social organizations that act on a regional, national and in some cases international level” (Piazza 2011: 329). In fact, the mobilizations that initiate such conflicts often extend beyond their regions of origin, they cross territories and are increasingly intertwined with other similar ones and with the Global Justice Movement, the No War movement and other social and urban movements, as those anti-austerity policies, in favor of the rights of migrants, for the citizens income and for housing (SQEK 2013), claiming alternative solutions and alternative models of development (della Porta & Piazza 2008).

The collective actors involved in the LULU movements are socially and politically heterogeneous, linked by multiple membership, and are ‘networked’ in the course of action, thus producing further waves of mobilization. This participation was extended to diverse social groups, ideological viewpoints and different generations, involving and re-defining the local community while remaining open to external actors. The types of collective actors that form into the networks, bringing their respective resources and skills while generating even some tensions, are very similar in the diverse LULU conflicts, although their relative weight and modes of interaction are rather different: Citizens’ committees, environmental associations, grassroots unions and squatted Social Centres (della Porta & Piazza 2008; della Porta et al. 2013).

What the previous research already quoted have highlighted is the internal support by the actors of the antagonist left to most of LULU movements in Italy, because Social Centres, grass-roots unions and other non-institutional groups have always played an active part within the territorial mobilizations and ‘trans-territorial’ movements (Piazza 2011: 338). Within the antagonist left, the presence of the Social Centres activists can be considered a regular feature in all or most of the LULU mobilizations emerged in recent years, where they can be deemed central actors together other players as the citizen’s committees and the environmental associations (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 54; Piazza 2011; della Porta & Piazza 2016).

As the other ‘antagonist’ groups, the Social Centres militants “were always perceived by other Lulu protesters as allies, even if ‘troublesome’ because of their stigmatization by the media as extremist and violent. Above all, there have often been collaborative relationships between social centres and citizens’ committees based on trust and mutual acknowledgement, thanks to continuous participation in the protest actions, even the riskiest ones, notwithstanding early distrust, tensions, and the ideological and cultural differences between them and both the unpolticized citizens and the more moderate components” (Piazza 2011: 338). Their strong commitment in the mobilization, but also in the consensual decision making processes, their experiences in the use of some forms of direct
action, their reliability in accordance with the decisions taken, their availability to “cross-fertilize” themselves encountering with others, have been recognized by their allies and the ordinary citizens, contributing to create bonds of mutual trust. Moreover, previous research had shown that the activists of the squatted Social Centres and the ‘antagonistic’ militants have brought to the LULU movements: “generational resources (young, mainly students), political-organizational resources (through the diffusion of No Tav and No Bridge themes outside the local dimension) and repertoires of action (countercultural activities, creative demonstrations, direct actions) developed during the earlier occupation of autonomous spaces” (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 109). Furthermore, the antagonist left, including Social Centres, contributed to a ‘scale shift’ in the discourse of protest, to the extension of issues beyond environmental ones, and especially to the creation of a network amongst the different mobilizations, transforming local conflicts into ‘trans-territorial’ (Piazza 2011: 338). Nevertheless, the presence of Social Centres brought also “elements of internal tension to the movement (although rare and mainly in the area of the Straits), particularly with respect to the political parties and environmental associations involved. Yet differences emerge more over broader strategies to adopt and differing conceptions of democratic participation than over specific repertoires of action” (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 110).

The purpose of this paper is to deepen and enrich the state of art about the role played and the contributions that Social Centres bring to the social movements – and possibly the social movements to the Social Centres – with particular reference to LULU movements. In trying to do so, we have referred to the concept of strategic engagement which “occurs when players with goals try to influence each other’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, whether cooperatively or conflictually” (Jasper et al. 2015, 399). According to Jasper, the strategic approach can help the study of social movements because it gives an equal importance to all the main actors (opponents and movements) and circumstances (internal and contextual ones). This concept involves players, which interact each other in a specific arena: “Players are those who engage in strategic action with some goal in mind” (Jasper 2014, 10). They can be both individuals and groups (no matter if formal or informal). According to Jasper, compound and individual players may work in a similar way, but there is a difference among them. Individuals that take part in a group can always depart, completely or partially, to pursue their own goals, purely or next to the group’s one; “compound players, even when they have names and bylaws and payrolls, are never completely unified. They are ‘necessary fictions’ that attract and inspire supporters through their promise of unity” (ibidem, 10). Players do not have a stable order of their goals, because it depends on the arenas in which they move, on the opportunities they have, on the interactions they develop inside and outside the arena, and so on. However, players may use different means to achieve their goals: “paying others to do what you want, persuading them to, and coercing them to” (ibidem, 11). Moreover, emotions and solidarity ties among players may affect goals, their order and the way players want to reach them. In fact, as Jaspers specifies, “some of the best strategies involve persuasion and the avoidance of conflict. Cooperation is a more common form of strategic interaction than conflict” (ibidem, 20). Players move in arenas, defined as “a bundle of rules and resources that allow or encourage certain kinds of interactions to proceed, with something at stake” (ibidem 14). Arenas, as players, differentiate on the base of their formal or informal nature, their size, or the type of players that interact within, and can interact with other arenas. Therefore, some players can play in different arenas, having different roles, opportunities and importance. So relations and interactions among players and arenas are important to understand roles, goals and means.

Such approach has mainly been used in analyzing the relations between social movements and their opponents. However, it can contribute to the study on social movements’ external and internal

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3 The No Bridge movement was aimed at prevent the construction of a bridge on the Messina Straits between Sicily and Calabria. The outcome of the protest was successful because the bridge was not built and the project stopped, at least until now.
relationships, such as the interactions among social movements and media, potential allies, new comers and among social movements’ actors. On the base of this ductility, it is possible to think a social movement network as an arena and its actors as players, which move and interact within the arena. It is possible to assume that the players involved in a social movement – including Social Centres – participate in such arena proposing and applying their own strategies. In fact, even if the actors, such as the Social Centres, they share and identify themselves with the main goals of a social movement, recognizing its general collective identity, in bringing some contributions to the mobilizations they can also propose and apply their own strategies, not only suitable for the overall movement but also reflecting their own specific collective identity (for example, about the use of radical forms of action).

In the following pages, starting on previous research (della Porta & Piazza 2008; Piazza 2011; della Porta et. al 2013) and relying on current fieldwork – through participant observation and semi-structured interviews – we focus on the role played by Social Centres activists within two of the most important LULU movements in Italy: those against the building of the high-speed railway in Val di Susa (No Tav), and the construction of a US Navy ground station of satellite communications in Sicily (No Muos). We will analyze the interactions of the Social Centres’ militants\(^4\) with other movement groups and activists, highlighting not only both the internal tensions, conflicting and cooperative relations, but also the capability for those Social Centres to implement their own strategies in the two territorial movements. In doing so, we do not only expect that Social Centres bring some contributions to the two territorial movements (in terms of radical practices, youth participation or internal conflicts), but we expect more. Participating in a social movement generates some consequences and outcomes also for the Social Centres themselves: for example, by enriching the experience for the militants of the Social Centres in a different context from the city or the neighborhood in which they are usual to be active. In addition, when police repression and judiciary action focuses on the radical flank of a movement, often hits the Social Centres activists. In other words, the relation between Social Centres and social movements is a two-way relation, which generates consequences and outcomes for both actors that they can evaluate as positive and/or negative.

**The Social Centres activists in the NO Tav movement**

The protest campaign against the construction of a 57 km tunnel, as part of the TAV (*Treno Alta Velocità* – High Speed Rail Line) in Val di Susa, Piedmont, close to the border with France, originated in the 1990s (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 13-15), but became more visible in the early 2000s, when the second Berlusconi government accelerated the policy-making process. The No Tav campaign, which started as a reaction to the risk of damage to the environment and health of citizens (due to soil erosion and asbestos within the mountain to be excavated), increasingly became proactive and constructive. The protest networks – environmentalists, local governments, citizens’ committees, Social Centres and grass-roots unions – developed both specific alternative proposals and, through a scale shift, ‘another model of possible development’, based on ‘de-growth’ (Latouche 2007); moreover, they claimed the right of the local population to decide the future of its own territory, demanding a different form of democracy, more participative and deliberative (della Porta & Piazza 2008: 107). The No Tav is the longest and best-known territorial movement in Italy, with the highest level of mass participation ever achieved in the country, and with the peaks of conflict and clashes with the police reached between 2011 and 2013, followed by complaints, arrests and convictions for the No Tav activists, above all the Social Centres militants and anarchists. Currently the mobilization goes on, notwithstanding the state repression and the will of the Italian and French governments to

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\(^4\) Aware that the terms militants and activists are often used with different meaning, in this context we prefer to use them both as synonyms when referred to the Social Centres.
continue and complete the building works (but they are far behind schedule and only the secondary tunnel is under construction).

As emerged by previous research, the Social Centres activists in Val di Susa have brought generational resources (mainly young students) to the No Tav movement, and above all political-organizational resources, that is firstly the capacity to indicate the “political line” of the movement, the direction towards which to move, the strategies of action to choose and to implement respect the policy of the institutional counterparty, as explained by one militant of the Social Centre Askatasuna of Turin (the most important Social Centre involved in the No Tav Movement):

“I think we gave a contribution of political knowledge, of organizational knowledge, of identifying the moments that counted and the points on which the conflict was outlined and to push on those points. I think we were able, with all the difficulties and mistakes of the case, to put before the eyes of the movement, or rather the most active part, what was the point on which there was the clash, the confrontation (with the opponent), the point on which one should not give in and one had to fight. This was our real contribution” (Int. No Tav G.)

The activists define themselves as very careful in dosing their forces and not “forcing the hand”, that is, not to propose political choices and strategies of action which would not have been understood and accepted by most of the other actors of the movement; they also had a role of ‘brake and control’ in respect of some components even more radical, as some anarchist groups coming from outside the Valley, who would have wanted to increase the level of the clash with the police:

“That was our greatest contribution: we were able to measure out the times when the practice of rupture was put in the field without distorting the meaning of the (social and political) composition of the movement, without forcing it exceedingly. There was also a time when we had a brake role, on some components of the movement that came from outside and they wanted to do (force the actions) right away ... we tried to ‘manage’ these moments and I think we succeeded” (Int. No Tav G.)

In this way they assumed a role of co-leadership, with other leading actors – no movement has a unique leader but usually a plural leadership never taken for granted – although they explicitly refuse this role, preferring a function of prodding and encouragement for the movement:

“We have been an active component within the movement; we have never had it all and we have never been interested to have everything (not to have the unique leadership of the movement), and not for an alleged horizontal practice, but because we have always had the awareness that we could win not by putting everybody behind us, but being as a prodding, an active goad, a stimulus within a wider thing (movement); that was especially the awareness of the comrades who have lived the thing (the situation of the movement) from the start and they were in the valley, then the whole social center moved in support” (Int. No Tav G.)

The excerpt on “the comrades who have lived the thing from the start … in the valley” refers to the activists of the SC Askatasuna who were internal to the movement from the beginning, founding the Popular Committee of Bussoleno in Val di Susa, allowing the Social Centre militants to relate to and to put on the same level as the other No Tav committees, and then to be recognized from the outset as part of the movement. Aware of the role played, they used their political-organizational resources and abilities also to coordinate and maintain connected the different components of the movement, from the most radical – the anarchist groups – to the most moderate, the institutional actors like the mayors of the Valley; they were conscious that their presence was useful in terms of political legitimation and there was not the risk they would affect the choice of the movement nor to institutionalize it:

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3 Beyond the Askatasuna, other Social Centres are active in Turin – as Gabrio, Asilo, and Murazzi – but their activists are usual to participate in the No Tav movement not as representatives of their Social Centres.
“There are people who at certain times and contexts have an enormous weight, can determine things and, when it happens, may be unrecoverable and cause rifts. Instead, we have always worked for the unity of the movement, from mayors to the most radical forms. In our analysis it was essential that there were mayors who continued to say ‘no’ at the institutional negotiation tables; fundamental in Susa Valley were the No Tav electoral lists or No Tav activists in the local administrations; we do not elect anyone – the breaking with the White Overalls occurred right on the “entrismo” policy\(^6\) - but we have a pragmatic look on the different situations, because it was an effective strength on the ground that he had behind the movement; those institutional actors, the mayors, were not able to affect the choices of the movement, but it was more the movement which conditioned the mayors, from a certain point on” (Int. No Tav G.)

Through their participation in the mobilization, the Social Centres militants increased their political strength and legitimation, thanks to their ability to enter in touch and cross-fertilize with other actors and above all with ordinary citizens, developing bond o mutual trust with them and contributing to train new activists and to politicize ordinary people:

“in Val Susa a virtuous relationship has developed between the more antagonistic components (including Social Centres) and an average social composition of citizenship, often without political history, basically ‘legalistic’; there was a process of encounter … the history has been more than ten years and that there have been real processes of mutual knowledge and trust (between antagonistic militants and ordinary people)… What the movement gave us was quite a ‘bath of reality’: we grew up there as a political force, as recognizable as social and political weight on the city and on the national level, thanks to this movement; we had our history in the city, but it is clear that the movement has increased our strength… With the expression ‘bath of reality’ we mean that we have dealt with a social composition entirely different from us, that is, the elderly, parents, etc. It has been very useful to deal with these differences and we managed to do what is much more difficult in the city… in Susa Valley it has formed a layer of militants of up to 50, 60, 70 years, that even now is in front of the gates in order to block the means of transport. We contributed and it is quite priceless, it is the best and most interesting thing that there has been so far” (Int. No Tav G.)

Last but not least, these activists were able to use and reactivate the memory of the past struggles, like the Resistance against Nazi-fascists during the Second World War or the Commune of Paris, as legitimizing function of the practices of resistance, that is, the use of radical, direct and sometime violent (against things) forms of action:

“The reference to the imaginary of the Partisans is that of the Resistance (against Nazi-fascists during the IIWW) precisely, is the use of the force, of the illegality. In Val Susa we used it a lot because it was a legitimizing reference, because in the Valley, the Resistance was strong as a phenomenon (so many families with relatives in the Resistance).… It is important the Resistance as one of the core elements of the imaginary, but then there are others that emerged: the fact that the ‘Free Republic of the Maddalena’ in Venaus was called in that way, at the same time took over an imaginary more ‘Communard’, there they have always been many elements that have been reactivated” (Int. No Tav G.)

Even if the SC Askatasuna militants are very active in the No Tav movement through a territorial committee, they received, and are still receiving, back some outcomes - positively evaluated - that are considered useful not only inside the No Tav movement but also for the other activities they carried out in Turin. On the one hand, thanks to the No Tav movement, the Askatasuna activists were able to do experiences that otherwise they would not be able to do; in addition, they increased their political weight and popularity at local and national level. On the other hand, the Askatasuna militants have been often subject to repression actions made by the authorities. For example, in June 2011, few

\(^6\) The White Overalls were another political network of the Social Centres (see footnote 2) - above all in the North East Italy - coming from the Autonomia – as the Antagonist/Autonomist network of the SC Askatasuna – with which a political split took place in the 1990s because they choose the “entrismo” policy, that was the strategic choice to “enter” in the local institutions by participating to municipal election in alliance with the radical left-wing parties (Mudu 2012; Piazza 2013).
days before the eviction of the Free Republic of Maddalena, the Turin Prosecutor emanated 65 notices of investigation to a group of No Tav activists (among them, some from the SC Askatasuna). Simultaneously, police raided the Askatasuna very early in the morning, by breaking down the door with a battering ram, in order to search the Social Centre. More recently, 8 activists of Popular Committee of Bussoleno have been undergone to home detention and 4 students of CUA – *Collettivo Universitario Autonomo* of Turin (Autonomous University Collective) were detained for a period and are still under precautionary measures.

**The Social Centres activists in the No Muos movement**

The movement against the MUOS (Mobile User Objective System) started in 2008-2009 in Niscemi (Sicily), with the main goal to stop the construction of a ground station of satellite communications inside the nearby US Navy base. If at the beginning the local residents had protested because they were worried about the health risks and environmental damage due to radio waves, very soon in the course of the mobilization other protesters joined the town inhabitants and their frames were extended beyond the concern for electromagnetic pollution: from NIMBY to NOPE activism. In fact, the struggle broadened in what the social movement scholars have called scale shift (Tarrow & McAdam 2005): activists from all over Sicily and Italy descended to Nischemi to participate in national marches, ‘struggling campsites’ and direct actions; for them, the No Muos became indeed a symbol of territorial resistance not only against unjust and nondemocratic decisions, but also against the war and the militarization of the land. The protest network formed by citizens committees, Social Centres and left-wing antagonist groups, grassroots unions and environmental associations, has been able to cross the territories from Niscemi to the regional, national and transnational level, targeting different institutions and linking with other similar LULU movements aimed at different uses of the territory (No Radar, No Tav, No dal Molin, No Bridge, No Triv, etc.), and others (anti-austerity movements, for housing rights, for migrants rights, etc.) (della Porta & Piazza 2016). The peaks of the conflict occurred between 2013 and 2014, when hundreds of activists blocked the road to prevent the entry of trucks into the base, being violently charged by the police, and thousands of demonstrators were able to invade and temporary occupy twice the US base (129 activists have been charged for that). In 2015 the regional civil court (TAR) has blocked the operation of the MUOS and the local Prosecutor has seized the building site, because the construction permissions had been granted without taking into account the risks for the health of the population, the environment and the air traffic of the nearby airports. On 6th May 2016, the definitive judgment of the CGA (Council of Administrative Justice, the second and ultimate civic judicial step in Sicily) has accepted the appeal of the Italian Defense Ministry, stating not harmful to the health the electromagnetic waves. In addition, on 5th August, the Court of Review of Catania has released from seizure the site, despite a still ongoing criminal proceeding for environmental offenses and illegal building at the local Court. Notwithstanding, there are no official information about the operation of the overall system, but Niscemi’s emplacement is now able to transmit. Nowadays, the No Muos continue to protest and demonstrate in the streets and in the cork forest around the US base (a ‘trekking’ walk on 21st August and a national demonstration next 2nd October).

In the No Muos movement, various and different Sicilian Social Centres entered in the protest campaign in a second phase, generating a complex network of internal relations:

“By the time, there was a network of committees, at the begging supported mainly by COBAS, and realities near to it, and FAS (*Federazione Anarchica Siciliana* – Sicilian Anarchist Federation), that had created in some Sicilian towns and cities some grassroots committees against MUOS, which are coordinated through

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7 In December 2013, four No Tav activists were arrested on charges of terrorism (recently dropped) for having sabotaged a compressor. As the event has affected individuals that do not belong to the collective actor discussed herein, it is still important to report the event because the gravity of the accusation.
the Regional Coordination. Around it other realities participated: us from Palermo, others from Sicily, other Social Centres and collectives such as Officina Rebelde and Aleph from Catania, or Teatro Pinelli from Messina” (Int. No Muos I.)

Nevertheless, differently from the No Tav case, the Sicilian Social Centres activists decided not to set up or to join any No Muos committee, and not to enter in the Regional Coordination with the other local committees. They belong to the No Muos movement as Social Centres, with their own identity recognized by all the other actors of the movement. In analysing the contributions that Social Centres brought to the No Muos movement, such differentiation means that each player gave something different to the mobilization:

“It is not possible to give a unique opinion on the role of these metropolitan groups (Social Centres). The point is that without their support, also in terms of numbers, it is not possible to think about No Muos struggle. They are able to bring a certain amount of social capital from the city, in terms of a huge amount of students that fill a bus or open a demonstration, in terms of the intelligent use of communication as Officina Rebelde does, in terms or radical forms of direct actions during demonstrations, when it is necessary (as it has been during the first and second campsite). It is an essential contribution. The problem is to find a point of political mediation” (Int. No Muos F.)

What is clear from this piece of interview is that each Social Centre has brought to the No Muos movement different kind of contributions on the base of their identity, abilities and possibilities. However, with all their differences and specifications, the Social Centres have brought overall generational resources, (mostly young students and precarious workers), political-organizational resources (they were the main organizers of the permanent Picket near the US base), and repertoires of action based on counter-cultural activities, symbolic demonstrations and above all direct actions.

Beyond these types of resources, the Sicilian Social Centres were able to propose to the No Muos movement and to put in practice their own political strategies. This happened above all in a period of low mobilization in Niscemi, between September 2013 and March 2014, as an activist says:

“in these moments, in moments of crisis like in all moments of crisis for movements, the organized comrades ‘dictate the line’ (propose and put in practice a specific political strategy, ed.), isn’t it? There are the political areas” (Int. No Muos F.)

Therefore, the cooperation within the movement happened not without tensions with the other more moderate components of the movement, but the Social Centres activists - together with the other groups - were able to preserve the unity of the movement. In fact, if the internal tensions and conflicts occurred on the strategies and forms of action between activists and group generationally and politically very different (the younger and more radical Social Centre militants vs. the older and more moderate pacifists and environmentalists), they were almost always overcome through deliberative processes, cooperation and division of labor (the ones more expert in direct action, the others more capable on legal and informative actions, but not only). As showed by the successful mass invasions of the base on the 9th August 2013 and the ups and downs outcomes of the legal actions, the different activists have used diverse means without delegitimize those of the others. As you can notice by the surprised words of an old pacifist activist interviewee:

“After the 30 March 2013 demonstration, there was a contrast between the Regional Coordination of Committees and the Picket and antagonist activists, which led to the formation of two different decision-making arenas: the assembly of the Coordination (the grassroots committees) and the ‘movement assembly’ (the Coordination plus other antagonist activists and groups), in which internal conflicts were overcome by means of labour division and cooperation. In fact, consensual processes sometimes seemed to work well in delicate moments of direct action: on August 2013, there was (on that occasion) a political commitment of the most radical sectors, such as Anomalia (Palermo Social Centre militants, ed.), with which we found the agreement and we managed to fix the points on the modalities and the management; and they took on the
responsibility of the physical contact (confrontation, ed.) with the police, their faces uncovered and hands-free … I was shocked to see these activists, faces uncovered and hands raised, trying to pretend to break the blockade of the police, taking the truncheon blows in the face without blinking, while on the other side, other protesters were trying to get in, as it had been decided in order to divert attention. I thought it was a great sign of political maturity and quality in co-management of that action which was not taken for granted; … I think that the police were neither prepared nor motivated to manage public order on that occasion and raise the level of repression” (Int. No Muos A.).

Other times the consensual model has worked less well, as on August 2014, when some demonstrators decided to leave the base after having invaded it, while others preferred to (try to) remain there with the activists who were climbed on the antennas (but they were thrown out by the police). Anyway, the collaborative co-existence between the Social Centres activists, who pushed for direct action, and the other groups, who preferred the more moderate and legalist actions, is confirmed by the words of one Social Centre militant of Palermo:

“One of the movement’s richness is this: each of these different practices were mainly promoted by groups different from each other. In the moments of more intense mobilization, however, these different practices have co-operated and are co-existent in multiplying ways. For this, the effects of a single practice have had a more important weight when it was put together with those of the others. The different souls and components belonging to the No Muos movement have their own peculiarities, their own interests and consolidated practices in which they are more expert and well-prepared; but the strong point of the movement was, in some moments, to be able to put together these different ways to understand and practice the opposition to the MUOS” (Int. No Muos I.)

Even in No Muos case, the Social Centre activists often have been subject to the repressive action by the authorities. Such as in 2014, when the Gela Court on 28th of July delivered 29 abode prohibitions to some No Muos activists. In the document that explains the reason of this precautionary measure, the Court writes (referring to the demonstration that took place on the 9th August 2013):

“Among the first rows of the demonstration, there were subjects ascribable to anarchist movements and Sicilian radical protesters, such as ‘C.S.A. Ex Karcere’ and ‘C.S.A. Anomalia’ from Palermo. ‘Collettivo Aleph’, ‘Officina Rebelde’, ‘Collettivo Experia’ and ‘Teatro Coppola Occupato’ from Catania. ‘Teatro Pinelli’ from Messina. Some of these activists were already known to police because they were present in previous and similar demonstrations”.

Summing up

Even our ongoing research, based on the updating on the No Tav movement and the fieldwork on the No Muos mobilization, has substantially confirmed what was emerged in previous research, as regard the creation of mutual bonds of knowledge and trust, the contribution in training new activists, in bringing expertise in the countercultural activities, in the symbolic and direct forms of action, as well as bringing generational and political-organizational resources. In particular, in the No Tav movement, the role of co-leadership – with other players – of the Social Centre Askatasuna of Turin emerged, even if defined as a function of prodding and stimulus for the movement: the activists contributed decisively to indicate the ‘political line’ of the movement, the strategies of action to choose and to implement; as well as they have had the capacity to dose their forces and not “forcing the hand” to the other actors of the protest campaign, the ability to maintain the unity of the movement coordinating and keeping connected the different components, from the most moderate like the mayors of the Valley, to the most radicals as the anarchist groups, with which playing a role of ‘brake and control’ in respect of them, being aware that the unity of the movement was the necessary condition to hope for success. Also in the No Muos mobilization, most of the Social Centres militants acted to preserve the unity of the movement notwithstanding the difference (and sometimes the diffidence) among them and with other groups and collective players. The internal tensions with the
other more moderate actors on strategies and forms of action were almost always overcome through deliberative decision-making processes, cooperative relations and division of labour: the radical and antagonist militants were more involved in direct and disruptive actions, while the moderate ecopacifists were more adapted to the informative and legal procedures, even if not exclusively, but above all without anyone delegitimized the means used by the others.

Even if each with their own peculiarities, from a strategic point of view, Social Centres in the No Tav and No Muos movements have not only been able to increase the political-organizational resources of the two territorial movements, but have also been able to propose and, in some cases, indicate the “political line”; that is, to elaborate and put in practice political strategies valid for the all the arena of the movement.

Aware that all information and collected data are not fully exhaustive, there are some evidences that confirm our initial expectations about the two-way relation among Social Centres and territorial movements. In fact, besides contributing to the No Tav struggle, the SC Askatasuna had also received benefits back (as new experiences for its militants, political weight and popularity) and remarkable costs to pay, in terms of repression. Quite the same is the case of the Sicilian Social Centres involved in the No Muos network. On the one side, they received as benefits the increasing of their militant experiences and the recognition by the other movement players of their ability to set cooperative relations. On the other side, the activists from Sicilian Social Centres involved in the No Muos struggle had paid (and are still paying) the costs of repression.

Nevertheless, there are some differences between the two movements. The main distinction relates the strategic choice adopted by Social Centres in taking part in the two movements. While the SC Askatasuna is active in the No Tav movement as a part of the local committees, the Sicilian Social Centres choose to maintain their own identities, without joining a grassroots committee or setting up a new one. This differentiation do not substantially modify the outcomes (as costs and benefits) that Social Centres receive back from participating in the LULU movements; but it may affect the duration, stability and type of the relationships with the other movement players. If in the first case, the Askatasuna activists have established and maintained more long lasting, stable and cooperative relations with the other committees and actors, in the second case, Sicilian Social Centres have experienced more fluctuating, unstable and tense relationships with other players. In both cases, tense and conflictual relationships are often due to the possible gap between the overarching goals shared by all the movement, and the peculiar aims pursued by the Social Centres, like the other social movement organizations: public visibility, recognition by other groups and institutional counterparts, growth of their political weight inside the social movements scene, the recruitment of activists and the enlargement of their grassroots. The difference relies on the diverse priority given to the peculiar goals in the Social Centres political agenda: they are lower than the overarching goals in the priority list of the SC Askatasuna, and higher than movement’s aims in the Sicilian case.

However, we need always to take in account that the just abovementioned peculiar goals are just some of the reasons of the involvement of the Social Centres activists in the LULU mobilizations. If we have also a look at the long history of this type of urban movement (Piazza 2012), their participation to wider campaigns and social movements comes either from their historical characteristics (such as the strong rootedness in the territory and in the urban fabric, and the close attention to the construction of alternative cultures) or from an already started path of political involvement in the territories - first for the area of the North East Social Centres, but then also for the autonomists and the anarchists (Panizza 2008). After all, the experiences of collaboration between Social Centres and other social movement organizations (including formal associations, parties and unions) have multiplied in the course of the mobilizations of the Global Justice Movement: from the Intergalactic Encounters to the Global Days of Action, from the European Marches against unemployment to the mobilizations against the war (della Porta et al. 2006); and more recently in the mobilizations in the education systems and in the anti-austerity movements.

With this paper we have tried to highlight new aspects of the relationships between Social Centres and territorial movements by the analysis of the No Tav and No Muos cases. In fact, we have
confirmed that Social Centres contribute to the territorial movements in terms of generational, political-organizational and strategic resources. Moreover, the Social Centres are not only the “work force” of the LULU movements but they are able to propose and apply political strategies more or less accepted by the other movement players. Lastly, besides than giving, the Social Centres also receive back outcomes that can be evaluated positively and/or negatively, that means the relations with LULU movements are not one-way, but two-way. Even if these results are related to two specific case studies, they could be useful to stimulate future research, to highlight new aspects about the relationships among Social Centres and other social movement, and, more generally, on the internal relations of social movement’s actors.

References


Interviews

Int. No Tav G.: Interview with Gianluca, Askatasuna Social Centre militant, Torino, 6/6/2015, carried out by Massimiliano Andretta.

Int. No Muos I.: Interview with Ivan, Ex Carcere Social Centres militant, Palermo, 14/1/2014, carried out by Federica Frazzetta.

Int. No Muos A.: Interview with Antonio, reporter and antimilitarist activist, Messina, 17/1/2014, carried out by Federica Frazzetta.

Int No Muos F.: Interview with Federico, activist of Officina Rebelde Catania, Catania, August 2015, carried out by Federica Frazzetta.